

Participatory development and the water sector: a 'tyranny' of development cooperation or an important opportunity for a politicised and radical development practice?

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Introduction

In the past few decades participatory development has been in vogue for development cooperation programmes worldwide. Scholars claim that this trend is the result of the remarkable failures of coercive ‘top-down’ projects introduced in developing countries during the seventies and the eighties (Choguill et al., 1993); these projects were led by professionals with northern political scopes in developing countries (Mayoux, 1995). In the quest to legitimize development programmes and make them more sustainable, the idea of a ‘bottom-up’ approach appeared. In the nineties, participatory methods became the new way of pursuing development programmes (Mayoux, 1995).

As any new theory, participatory development applied to international cooperation was quickly criticised by scholars who questioned what political discourse and scopes lay behind the notion of participation. This criticism became more pronounced after the theory was implemented by many international agencies such as the World Bank in their development programmes (Mohan, 2007). Cook and Kothari (2001) came to call participation as the “new tyranny” in development studies and Rahnema (1997) labelled it a “Trojan horse” capable of hiding its true goals.

With particular reference to the water sector, the participatory approach can be defined as one of the main development principles related to sustainability both from the point of view of the Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM, Dublin 1992) policies and of the water sector governance (GWP, DfID 2009, EC 2010 etc.). Concerning IWRM, the Dublin principles (1992) states that water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policy-makers at all levels. Concerning water sector governance, there are different approaches towards international cooperation, such as the ones from the European Commission (EC), the African Development Bank (AfDB), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Global Water Partnership (GWP), the World Bank (WB), etc., which seem to go towards the similar positive inclusion of the concepts of participation. According to the EC (Merel et al. 2009) water governance approach, the participation of all actors in the sector and their ownership of governance processes is supposed to ensure that the interests of “right holders” (citizens, public authorities, partners, etc.) are respected along with other three fundamental principles: inclusion, accountability and transparency. The AfDB (2009) states that the involvement of all users in the process of developing appropriate policies and regulations for water resources management and use is essential for effective water sector governance. Similar conclusions are brought by the Overseas Development Institute in a paper commissioned by the DfID (Plummer and Slaymaker, 2007). According to GWP, the quality, relevance and effectiveness of government policies depend on ensuring wide participation throughout the policy chain – from conception to implementation (Rogers, 2003).

As it happens in general with all new mantras of development cooperation, experiences of applying the participatory approach to the water sector, even if fostered with great emphasis, showed in the past little evidence of success, effectiveness and sustainability (Cleaver, 1999). Besides, when considering the participatory approach in the water sector not only in developing countries but also in Europe, even with the important investments set up for the EU Water Framework directive since the early 2000's, still the results are uncertain while it is clear that the participatory process is resource intensive (Pahl-Wostl, 2007) adding yet another obstacle to the implementation of the IWRM participatory principle in developing countries.

In this paper the scepticism and criticism of participation will be discussed and will be followed by a look at how participation might actually provide opportunities towards a more radical and politicised development practice if it is given the time and the space to do so.

Participation an instrument of mainstreaming discourses

The concept of participation invokes a wide range of definitions and perceptions. From the seventies until today, this notion has been influenced by ideas of popular participation, community development and, more recently, stakeholder perspectives (Mohan, 2007). It is also seen as a process that allows power sharing, mutual learning (and) that is capable of bringing social change (Mohan 2008). In general participatory development is considered to be a process that empowers people by including local populations and stakeholders in the making and implementation of policies that affect their lives (Jennings, 2000). In particular, participation involves considering local knowledge so that actors can sustainably shape their own future (Jennings, 2000). It is difficult to criticise bringing marginalized people into the process of their own development as legitimizing decisions and empowering people is a desirable goal (at least in theory) for everyone involved in development studies.

Although participatory development is theoretically and ethically appealing, criticism was nevertheless voiced. Many of the criticism concern its actual application and the power relations it involved. In "Participation: The new Tyranny" by B.Cook and U.Kothari (2001), the authors collected eleven papers assessing the limits of the participation discourse. What they mainly denounced is that firstly participatory development does very little in reality to empower people and secondly that its actual application is not that different to the previous 'top-down' development programme approaches.

Participation in the water sector is also indicated as a pro-poor rhetoric added to water and sanitation policies since the 1990s (Castro, 2007).

Therefore, the claim that the active participation of citizens can be a tool improving governance of service provisions, above all when governments do not fulfil their public role of improving coverage of essential WSS (water supply and sanitation), seems strongly backed in the scientific literature but with very few supporting positive examples in fields' projects experiences. One of these few positive

examples is Chad, where the government in rural areas plays a controversial role and it is unable to provide the basic WSS services for the population. The EC (2007) is carrying out in Chad a long term programme for water supply and it is responsible of the 47% of the improved boreholes of the country. The villagers are the unique responsible of managing the maintenance of the systems, the failure rate of the water supply systems is around the 7% mostly linked to older pumping systems. This comes with a support from the EC programmes not only to the construction of the infrastructures (around 80% of total costs of the programme) but also to the establishment of the maintenance supporting network (around 10% of total costs of the programme). One can claim that the few positive cases could be related to a consistent political and socio-economic situation of countries like Chad and other similar countries, as for instance the countries defined by the many international development agencies as fragile states (World Bank, 2009), where the total absence of the State and of the private sector do not leave room for comparisons and participatory management is not a choice but the only possibility.

In general, participatory development has been widely scrutinised by many authors for a variety of reasons. However, some common themes are its failure to be a radical (meant as transformative) new way of achieving development and the fact that it is incapable of challenging power relations at the macro and micro scale. The most important criticisms are reviewed below.

Participation has been accused of homogenising local differences often favouring local elites or not considering gender disparities, and therefore increasing local inequalities (Williams, 2004). Furthermore, it has been (and still is) used as a rhetorical discourse which does not in practice empower populations, but rather serves as a way of legitimizing and enhancing the credentials of an – often Western- agency program (Mohan, 2008). Even though a program may wish to involve its stakeholders, very often developmental projects are financed by Northern agencies, governments or foundations that hold the balance of power in Northern-Southern partnerships. As the latter is often financially dependent on the former, it can hardly object to Northern liberal agendas compromising the participatory nature of the program and its radical potential.

Overall, the implementation of participatory development is guilty of being like a poisoned gift that at first sight seems very appealing, but turns out to be toxic keeping people disempowered while giving them the false impression that power has been transferred to them. In this sense, participatory development has been accused of de-politicising development by allowing the “acceptance and even the reinforcement of existing power relations” (Harris, 2002:86). By failing to change development practices (by only creating an impression of grassroots empowerment), participatory development is also pictured as a tool for alleviating the responsibility of global development agencies over developmental programme (Williams, 2004).

For all the reasons mentioned above, the transformative nature of participatory development then loses its *raison d'être*. The radical potential of this theory also loses its credibility by allowing itself to be incorporated into the wider neo-liberal political scheme of decentralization. Policies of decentralization, meant to delegate power from the central state to local powers with the intention to bring closer citizen with the institutional machine (Hickey and Mohan, 2004). However, this process has been implemented differently than initially intended and often led developing countries to reduce the presence of the state, increasing bureaucracy and strengthening local elites. The latter group seized the opportunity to increase their positions and clientelist relations (ESCAP, 2009). Rolling back the state and making Non-Government Organisations (NGO's) responsible for the success of developmental programmes (where the State had previously failed) has therefore weakened the social contract between the state and its citizens (Hickey and Mohan, 2005). Putting the state aside and giving the responsibility of development to NGOs can have ambiguous effects because they are often financially dependent on global agencies and therefore are also a vector of liberal northern development conceptions. Without generalizing the problem to all NGOs, it is possible that NGOs can contribute to keeping the status quo alive rather than pursuing a radical social change that an empowered, legitimate state could do more successfully (Hickey and Mohan, 2005). In a dialogue between the two authors of "Women, NGO's and the contradictions of empowerment and disempowerment: a conversation" by Nagar and Raju (2003), the two women debate over Indian NGOs involved in helping women. They discuss their accountability and transparency and seem to consider them to be donor-driven and not interested in pursuing actual change in policies as social change does not even appear in their agendas anymore (Nagar and Raju, 2003).

Although is theoretically inspiring, in practice, participatory development has proved for many to be another form of Northern liberal domination and not a radical practice capable of creating a different type of society. In fact, as claimed by Castro (2007), with particular reference to Latin America, mainstreamed policies of WSS services are contradictory aiming at shaping the sector around market principles while at the same time trying to be in line with environmental sustainability and expanding services to the poor, and achieving democratic accountability through the PSP. For Castro the problem is not the PSP but the strategies pursued to implement it. These strategies fail to achieve real governance objectives, especially in the most disadvantaged developing countries. To make participation applicable and useful for citizens there is therefore a need for a right policy framework. In India, for example, Joy et al. (2007) affirm that that stakeholder participation in collaborative policy making process and the related water governance need a thorough normative framework to avoid being only part of a sterile discourse. They even suggest the creation of an "agency" with the responsibility of bringing all the stakeholders to the table of negotiations and find mutual solutions for their water resources concerns.

In order to reawaken participation's potential to achieve a radical change in development practice, the need for re-politicising development through the concept of active citizenship and stronger links between institutions and their populations will be explored as a potential solutions to bring about change in the development policies of the water sector.

Participation in the form of active citizenship: is that the answer?

Although it has been strongly criticised for its potential to be another tool in the hands of western countries to maintain the *status quo* and not actually change power relations balance, the potential qualities of participatory development must also be considered. As aforementioned, participatory development can be manipulated and used by the wrong institutions for wrong purposes. However, it is by nature radical and developed to challenge power relations and current mainstream development practice although it has not been often used in this way yet. The status quo can be challenged and however, change is difficult to accept and achieve. Transformations take time and therefore other opportunities must be given to this theoretically inspiring concept.

Foucault stated that "The liberty of men is never assured by the institutions and laws that are intended to guarantee them. That is why almost all of these laws and institutions are quite capable of being turned around." (Foucault in Elden and Crampton, 2007:10). He strongly believed that within power relations there is always potential for resistance and disobedience (Elden and Crampton, 2007). It is through this optic that participatory development has to be seen as a potential tool to turn around the current situation. Having extensively discussed its failure, the question now is: *how* can participatory development still challenge mainstream development?

To begin with, some success stories of participation programmes exist. The World Bank, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), USAID and the international Relief/Development Project (IRDP) have evaluated some case studies where participatory methods were adopted. They discovered that participatory programmes were often more successful in addressing local needs than programmes which did not consider local realities and knowledge (Jennings, 2000).

Participatory programmes addressing local needs entail stronger impact and they are more sustainable when coupled with a broader political process. In fact, what Hickey and Mohan (2005) particularly advocate for is participatory methods being incorporated not just at the program-local level, but also in a broader political space where things can change. Intervention is needed in the governance structures that determine power relations and allocate resources such as at the state level. Therefore, it is essential to strengthen state capacity building and not to weaken it by reducing the social contract between citizens and their state. On the contrary, through participatory programmes citizens need to be involved

in political structures in order to legitimize them and influence their future in a positive way (Williams, 2004).

To challenge exclusionary political norms, citizens first have to clearly understand the political structures (Mohan and Hickey, 2004). Mohan and Hickey (2004) discuss the importance of citizenship - which will be more deeply analysed further in this paper- as a strategic basis upon which participation can be used as a radical new way of achieving development. Linking therefore citizens with the state touches the argument of governance. Gaventa in "Towards participatory governance: assessing the transformative possibilities" (2004) argues that positive development outcomes can especially be achieved if the gap between citizens and a country's institutions are reduced. He advocates for a more direct and empowered form of participation into local governance calling for a more accountable and responsive exchange. Gaventa argues that participation in order to be radical and transformative compared to mainstream development practice; it has to be more directly linked with the political sphere. Only by placing participatory methods - and not just representative ones as is the case in most of democratic states- within the democratic practice the voices of marginalised groups can be effectively heard (Gaventa, 2004). In Kerala, participation was included into a broad political project, that is a state level programme aiming at increasing social justice for marginalised groups (Mohan, 2007). The local project, although state-led, included local indigenous actors. The project directly engaged with the underlying process of participatory development and policy making which then successfully influenced political decisions leading to more redistributive policies for the poor (Mohan, 2007). This example shows furthermore that decentralization in these cases can be the necessary political process that reduces the gap between institutions and citizens. This approach proves to be successful if it is implemented with the true intention of empowering people.

The association of the principle of participation with that of citizenship creates what Mohan (2007) defines as active citizenship or civic republicanism. These concepts call people for an active engagement to influence decision making in order to influence their future lives. Participatory citizenship creates "open new arenas of activity and debate rather than waiting to be invited in" (Mohan 2007 :791). These spaces can be created on a local level or state level or even at a more global level as international movements do. Spaces for activity are therefore abundant; the problem lies in the ways in which people engage with them and access them.

Social movements and NGOs who prioritise advocacy are places where the political becomes important and most precisely where participation actually takes place in the quest of bringing social change (Mohan and Hickey, 2005). Hickey and Mohan (2005) take the case of the Zapatistas movement, among others, as a successful example of a participatory model that advocated for important political and constitutional reforms. Self-help organizations are an additional example of a form of participation which confront power structures directly . It offers alternative solutions to local

problems in developing sustainable management strategies for environmental problems or urban livelihood conflicts challenging the political status quo (Bryant and Bailey, 1997). Calling for an active citizenship is therefore a potential answer to use the transformative and radical potential of participation to successfully empower people and challenge power relations.

Scholars differentiate invited spaces with claimed one. Invited spaces are those into which people are invited to participate by some authority (Gaventa, 2004), such as the above cited example of Kerala's state programme. Claimed spaces are those spheres created by marginalised people (Gaventa, 2004) that often succeed in accessing them through popular mobilisation as the Zapatistas movement highlights. A stronger civic engagement of the population therefore can give opportunities for people to be heard if they previously had not been invited to participate in the process of policy making they can still however create the opportunity to be heard. NGOs and social movements, therefore can help to create these spaces for bringing social change. Examples of successful participation are many, these experiences already mentioned and other two that will be illustrated further in this paper are by no mean meant to be easily generalized. They are context specific, however their scope is to show how participation and public engagement from above can have successful results that can give us the hope that participation can be a solution to development practices.

As in mentioned in the introduction, since participation is one of the most important principles of IWRM in general and not just limited to development cooperation, it is interesting to consider some participation experience disjointed from the development cooperation discourse. The case of the city of Grenoble is an example of participation in the form of active citizenship in water in Europe. Grenoble saw a scandal regarding the contract for the provision of water services ended in a corruption trial. In Grenoble, two very different forms of 'civil society' involvement can be noted. The first is the formation of local grass-roots organizations (for example Eau Secours in Grenoble) who, in the absence of formal mechanisms for participating in local government decisions, operate through a combination of ties with minority local politicians (eg. the Greens) and bringing carefully documented lawsuits. A legal requirement for cities of more than 10,000 inhabitants to set up local consultative commissions on issues of local public services has existed since 2002 but has been barely implemented in practice yet: it remains to be seen whether such institutions will make the input of civil society as a permanent and needed input in the institutional set up and provide sufficient space for the concerns currently held. Meanwhile, a second and very different form of civil society participation in the case of Grenoble involved the structural level of making key decisions about whether or not to delegate the operation of water service delivery. That was the advocacy role of non-governmental organisations called Public Service 2000, assisting local governments of small towns in monitoring the legal requirements of contracting for water services. This is an interesting structure which, however, may

only be feasible in the context of the background centralization of both state and private providers which characterizes the French situation (Morgan, 2005).

The case of Cochabamba in Bolivia, very well known, is a flagging example for activists all over the world, “The mobilizations developed spontaneously with support from the Departmental Coordinator for the Defense of Water and Life, and people took to the streets massively” (Peredo Beltran, 2004). The Cochabamba conflict of 2000 in Bolivia, is a crucial example of brave citizens claiming their rights over an essential resource such as water. The conflict began because of the take over of the private company Aguas del Tunari consortium over the Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation Service (SEMAPA) responsible of guaranteeing access to safe drinking water and formerly publicly owned (Peredo Beltran, 2004). As water prices quickly rose citizens started to peacefully manifested (Dolinsky, 2001). Social organizations got together and organised successful public consultation which gave the population the legitimate right to demand the “annulation of the contract and the quick modification of Law 2029” (Peredo Beltran, 2004). As the mobilization grew, the scope of citizens claims started to increase and put into question the whole Bolivian political system based on corruption and subjection to foreign investment.

The war was considered a success as the contract was withdrawn and the whole system had to take into account the claims strongly brought by the citizens (Peredo Beltran, 2004).

With all the above mentioned examples, without having the presumption to illustrate all the existing cases of civic participation in water management, this paper aims at showing how participation truly driven by citizens implying their effective involvement could be a meaningful way in achieving better and more equal water management outcomes.

Conclusions

As illustrated in the first part of this paper, participatory development can understandably be compared to a new tool of mainstream of development practice in the water sector. Often used to simply legitimize top down (i.e. donor-driven or government-driven) development programmes without having the real intent of contributing to social change participatory development has proved to be very deceiving. The actual implementation of this complex socio-economic and political process seems very farfetched from its theoretical positive influence. Beyond these important criticisms, we affirm that participatory development theory has the potential to create radical development practice. The questions which ought to be solved in the future regard the issue of how it is used and by whom it should be considered. Participatory development proved in fact to be successful on some occasions. We identified developing processes which appear to reveal the true transformative nature of participatory development as they included it in a wider political project. Engaging in the political

sphere by being “invited in” or by “creating” the possibility to access it is the key through which active participatory citizenship can actually empower people, challenge power relations and finally contribute to a radical alternative to mainstream development.

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Abstract

In this paper we analyse the role of participatory development as a tool improving governance of services provision in the water sector. In the past few decades the scientific literature and the international cooperation agencies understandably promoted participatory development as a new tool of mainstream development practice. As a result participatory development has been and it is in vogue for development water sector related programmes worldwide. This approach is the result of the failures of the first 50 years of development cooperation made of coercive ‘top-down’ projects. As a “new” solution towards the sustainability of northern investments in development cooperation the idea of a ‘bottom-up’ approach appeared as a magic potion to make development programmes successful.

After its first wave of ubiquitous application in the nineties, participatory development was quickly criticised questioning the political strategy laying behind the notion of participation. In development studies, participation became the “new tyranny” or the “Trojan horse” used to hide the real political agenda of international development agencies or government programmes.

While participatory development theory has the potential to create radical development practice, the actual implementation of this complex socio-economic and political process seems very farfetched from its theoretical positive influence above all with regards to the complex management issues of the water sector. In this paper some case studies related to water sector development and services provision are presented analysing their relationship with citizen participation to understand how and when the participatory approach can be successful revealing its true transformative and innovative nature as a tool to improve water sector governance.

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